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Enduring the Long Take: Tsai Ming-liang's *Stray Dogs* and the Dialectical Image

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"Enduring the Long Take: Tsai Ming-liang's *Stray Dogs* (2013) and the Dialectical Image"

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Abstract: This essay attempts to show that Tsai's *Stray Dogs* (2013) offers a social critique of Taipei as a neoliberal, global, consumer city, and by so doing establishes a cinema of contemplation through such cinematic devices as the sustained long-take and slow, virtually still cinematic images. By developing Walter Benjamin's formulation of the dialectical image, this essay explores the extent to which Tsai's cinematic aesthetics reveals an aspect of the city which cannot be shown otherwise. It argues that his slow cinema creates a potentially revolutionary awakening in an audience accustomed to an immersive mode of cinematic experience which turns the suffering of others into a commodity and prevents a proper understanding of a societal phenomenon that calls for urgent attention. I compare the protagonist with other marginalized and destitute figures in such nineteenth-century literary texts as Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836), Baudelaire's prose poem "Good Dogs" (1865-67), and Hamsun's *Hunger* (1890), and those in the Sinophone films including Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The Sandwich Man* (1983) and Jia Jia Zhang-ke's *Xiao Wu* (1997).

Louis LO

Enduring the Long Take: Tsai Ming-liang's *Stray Dogs* (2013) and the Dialectical Image

The last sequence of Tsai Ming-liang's *Stray Dogs* (2013) is a unique twenty-one-minute sequence comprising two long-takes (fourteen and seven minutes long) which captures the protagonist staring at a huge panoramic charcoal mural depicting a nineteenth-century Taiwan landscape of mountain and cobblestone-riverbed scenery. It ends in silence and stillness, cinematic motion transformed into a frozen, monochrome image of the mural in a ruined building. Composed of scenes with minimal dialogue, like a series of assembled long-take footages, the film's non-traditional plot does not offer an empathetic identification for the audience, nor does it resolve satisfactorily. Instead, a near-still long-take inflicts upon the audience a tremendous boredom that has to be endured through the act of looking. Without presenting a solution to the characters' suffering, the film poses questions concerning the understanding of the gaze while offering a social critique of the city by problematizing the representation of suffering and visual legibility with the use of unique cinematic devices. It is this socio-aesthetical reading of the film that this paper pursues.

Using Walter Benjamin's conception of the "dialectical image," I argue that the film's devotion to pure affective transmission and the tension between the audience's endurance and fascination towards Tsai's quasi-still images make *Stray Dogs* a cinema of resistance. The resistance is three-fold: it resists ideological domination by making everyday images strange; it resists audience's expectation of identifying with the characters; and lastly, it resists seeing images simply as the representation of the city, instead viewing them as containing multiple layers of meanings. Tsai embraces an ambiguous narrative and rejects sympathetic identification not merely to produce an alienating, defamiliarizing effect, but also to create real understanding that requires the creation of what Benjamin calls "revolutionary awakening." Taking emotional identification as short-lived, superficial impressions, themselves a commodity for consumption, it is only with affective response that insightful comprehension and revolutionary awakening can be achieved. Real understanding, for Benjamin, happens when the dialectical image succeeds in creating a critical moment in the thinking process: "To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word, where the tension between dialectical oppositions is greatest" (*Arcades* 475; N10a, 3). Discussing such Benjaminian concepts as the "arrest of thought," "thinking," and "recognizability," I suggest that *Stray Dogs's* *pièce de résistance*, the last twenty-one minutes, offers an imagistic field for an insightful understanding of suffering in Taipei in particular, and a neoliberal city in general.

I am well aware that my paper draws on the revolutionary potentials implied in Benjamin, which for many critics is problematic. These views on Benjamin's political thoughts can be found in articles collected in the special issue in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (2011). James Martel insists on the timeliness and usefulness of Benjamin's political thinking in informing current revolutionary movements (Martel 307). For an account of Theodor Adorno's criticism of Benjamin see also Karen S. Feldman, whose reading "embeds the disruptive dialectical image within a narrative of Adorno-Benjamin critique, exposing Adorno's imposition onto Benjamin of a conflation of autonomy and aura and asking the question of how exactly mediation, dialectics, and theory are connected" (Feldman 353). This paper develops Martel's and Feldman's theses, examining to what extent Tsai's cinematic images possess such a revolutionary power.

Critical responses to Tsai's cinema have been enormous. His films are read by critics (David Barton; Ivy Chang; Kai-man Chang; Jen-yi Hsu; Agata Lisiak) as works engaging with social critiques of human conditions in the city in the age of globalization. Another prominent direction stresses reading his cinema as an artistic statement about cinematic aesthetics (Michelle Bloom; Hsiao-hung Chang; Song-hwee Lim; Song-yong Sing; Kai-lin Yang). None of these commentators, save for Chang and Sing, has discussed *Stray Dogs* in particular. (See my earlier analysis of Tsai's films (including *Strays Dogs*) in the context of cinematic representation of Asian cities in Louis Lo, "A Cinematic," 662-4.) In the following, I will first discuss the film's titles, then elucidate such representative figures of the city as the sandwich-man, the *flâneur* (as a foil to the sandwich-man), and the stray dog, and notions related to poverty in the city with reference to Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* (1890), Charles Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836), and Charles Baudelaire's prose poem "Good Dogs" (*Les bons chiens*) (1869), Hou Hsiao-hsien's "Son's Big Doll" (1983), and Jia Zhang-ke's *Xiao Wu* (1997) as critical comparisons to *Stray Dogs* before returning to Benjamin and how his theory illuminates Tsai's slow cinema.

Stray Dogs tells the story of an anonymous, under-privileged human-billboard (played by Lee Kang-sheng) and his struggles to take care of his teenage children. The family takes shelter in a ruined, abandoned building in which a panoramic mural is displayed. Lee, as the sandwich-man, is shown working and wandering, now pulling a boat to the shore, now urinating, now eating from a lunchbox, now smoking, now washing in a public toilet, now devouring a whole piece of cabbage, now holding a real-estate sign, now singing with tears, now contemplating a mural. (See Chien-hung Huang for the significance of these images shown in *Stray Dogs at the Museum* (2014), an installation exhibition curated by Tsai). As the story unfolds, three unnamed female figures appear, although it is unclear how they relate to each other. They include a woman appearing at the beginning of the film (Grace Yang), a supermarket manager (Lu Yi-ching), and a woman who owns an apartment (Chen Shiang-chyi), who, towards the end, offers Lee shelter and plays the role of his children's mother. The difficulty in understanding the film can be illustrated by the opening long-take sequence: a woman combs her long hair silently and slowly while sitting on the edge of a bed in which a boy and a girl are sleeping soundly (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Grace Yang combing hair while the children are sleeping

The audience will learn in the next sequence that the sleeping teenagers are the sandwich-man's children, Yi-cheng (son) and Yi-chieh (daughter), the only named characters. The woman's face is gradually exposed after a few rounds of combing. The long-take and slow action attract as much as distract attention, allowing the audience to study the wall's texture, the woman's sweating legs, and the children's sleeping sound. Grace Yang never appears in the film again. The stylized and unrealistic representation of the woman and her subsequent absence may lead to the interpretation that what follows is the children's dream. But this reading is never confirmed or contradicted by the narrative. It is even more puzzling when two female figures are involved in feeding the stray dogs, taking care of the children, and staring at the mural at critical moments, but are never present together.

At the most elementary level, a dialectic takes place in the discrepancy between the film's title in French and the Chinese (the film is co-funded by Taiwan and France). The French title *Les chiens errants* (rendered as *Stray Dogs* in English) is entirely different from the Chinese *Jiao You* (郊遊), which means "excursion." The two-fold image implied by the discrepancy between the two titles should be read together as "dialectics at a standstill," providing a full picture of the suffering of the marginalized figures represented. The Chinese title, like its English translation, is a formal term that would sound oddly official in everyday usage, and certainly does not suit the down-and-out protagonist. "Excursion" is a common composition topic for Chinese-language classes; in fact, it is the homework which Yi-cheng is writing at Chen's apartment, a self-reflexive moment of the film. It points

to an intertextual reference of the script which began with Tsai's attempt to adapt a novel, Dong Cheng-yu's (董成瑜) *Diary of a Young Boy* (男孩可日的日記), into a TV-series for Taiwan Public Television Service. "Diary of a Young Boy" remained *Stray Dogs*'s working production title (Tsai 148). Viewed as Yi-chen's excursion diary or composition homework, Taipei is a utopian city full of public spaces for loitering adventures, with huge trees, beautiful beaches, lots of green space, tent-like free lodging, unlimited supply of samplers in supermarkets, and unconditional care-takers who just pop up when needed. The opening sequence in which the children are sleeping belongs to this dream-world, but the *mise-en-scène* offers a critique of dreaming, because for Benjamin "dreams are now a shortcut to banality" (*Selected Writings* 2: pt. 1: 3). The film's task as social critique is to wake the audience up from the dream-world which is often narrated by an immersive mode of representation.

This phantasmagoric, banal, idealized dream-world is in contrast with that implied by the film's French title. *Les chiens errants* evokes Baudelaire, writer of nineteenth-century Paris, whose "Good Dogs" (*Les bons chiens*) reads:

I celebrate the scruffy dog, the pauper dog, the homeless dog, the roaming dog, the performing dog, the dog whose instinct, like any pauper's or gipsy's or actor's is wonderfully stimulated by Necessity, the kindest of mothers, truly the patron saint of intellects.

I sing in praise of destitute dogs, under-dogs, whether those who wander all alone through the tortuous ravines and gullies of the vast metropolis, or those who have said to some old outcast, with a wink of their witty, spiritual eyes, "Take me along with you, then perhaps we can make some sort of happiness out of our two poverties!" (*Paris* 245)

Baudelaire dedicates the writing to his friend, the Belgian painter Joseph Stevens (1816-1892), whose animal paintings portray urban outcasts, human beings and dogs alike, as in *Travelling Actor's Misfortune* (1847). The roaming dogs are city-based, and they survive even better than their human counterparts, the travelling artists and the homeless. Unlike the "unobservant fellows" who ask "Where do dogs go?" (245), the narrator-poet cares about the stray dogs and knows their conditions. Applying Deleuze and Guattari's ideas, Caroline Pollentier maintains that Baudelaire's praising of the stray dogs could be read "as a process of co-presence and an attentiveness to forms of becoming, suggesting a companionship *in absentia* between lone urban dogs and their human equivalents" (163). This is the implication of the allusion to the Kurosawa 1949 film with a similar title, *Nora Inu* (*Stray Dog*), in which the figure of the stray dog serves as an image for both the detective and the criminal. In Tsai's Taipei, dogs and human beings are mutually becoming each other, instanced in the same treatment that Lee's family and the dogs received from the cynophile. By calling attention to the figure of the roaming animal, Tsai claims the position of the poet who cares about stray dogs, with a further twist: the cinematic images are turned still, and the audience is forced to stare at the surface of the screen (as the characters stare at the mural), becoming an attentive spectator who is empowered to see the unrecorded parts of history through the staring depicted in the long-takes.

In a way, stray dogs and sandwich-men are both supposed to loiter, and belong to the same category of city waste; but the attention Baudelaire draws to the stray dogs, instead of inducing empathy, points only to the importance of the figure of the artist whose concerns and visual sensitivity are different. Instead of inducing empathy by comparing the stray dogs with the *flâneur*, I engage with Benjamin's criticism of the *flâneur*, arguing that the stray dogs are not figures of *flâneur* who consider themselves privileged observers of the commodity culture, a system that they manage to distance from. Rather, the stray dog is a figure of parody of the *flâneur*—they are no more than the stray dogs, though unchained and strolling, always returning to the same ruined buildings for feeding. The stray dogs are excluded from the official record, so to look at them is to shift the focus of looking in history. Calling the film *Stray Dogs* prompts an interpretation of the film as a record of an alternative history which requires a different way of looking, emphasizing the life of the marginalized city-dwellers as stray dogs and how easily interchangeable they are. To understand the film is to read the two titles together: *Jiao You* (Excursion), the diary essay which tells a young boy's fantasy about Taipei, and *Les chiens errants* (*Stray Dogs*), emphasizing the need for a new attentiveness in order to see the forms of mutual becoming between the city's human and animal residents marginalized by urban modernity.

There is yet another, more subtle dimension in the English title. Ackbar Abbas contends that the cinematic world represented in *Stray Dogs* arguably evokes "straw dog" (a sacrificial offering made of grass in the shape of dog), an image vital in Laozi's *Dao De Jing* (道德經): "Heaven and earth are cruel, all beings are regarded as straw dogs for sacrifice" (天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗) ("道德經," Ch. 5, translation mine), or "Heaven and earth refuse kin-kindness / Treating all things as dogs of straw"

(Moss Roberts's translation in Laozi, *Dao De Jing* 38). Abbas argues that heaven and earth's "refusal of *Ren*" (不仁) does not mean "cruel" nor "unkind," but rather, it implies that the order of things is not of a human order and therefore should not be reduced to a humanist view (Abbas, "Technical"). The straw dog is thus an image from the perspective of the non-humanist order of things, and heaven and earth's being "indifferent and not preferential" (39). Following this logic, the extreme long-take, for Abbas, is not designed for the audience to look closely and to discover meaning, but to allow enough time for the viewer to realize that there is nothing, at least at the level of expressing emotion and narrating meaning, to understand in the repeated looking ("Technical"). This "negative epiphany" ("Technical", see also Abbas, "Poor" 14) is the negative knowledge acquired from an extended gaze offered by the long-take, "a double take of a double take" ("Technical"). Acknowledging Abbas's insight in the philosophical bearing in *Stray Dogs*'s long-take, this paper explores the aesthetics and political possibilities in Tsai's cinema.

The dialectic also operates in two weeping sequences, both depicting the father's suffering. The problem of emotional identification and the working of affective response, which resists empathetic identification, are illustrated by the "Singing and Weeping" and "Devouring Miss Cabbage" sequences, which offer two contrasting modes of representing pain and suffering. For the purposes of my analysis, "emotion" refers to feelings produced by the subject that are conscious and nameable to them, whereas "affect" is an ineffable psychological element conjured up in response to a repressed desire (Tambling 11). In this sense, affect is not dissimilar to pain, a state which can hardly be expressed with language. On this limitation, Virginia Woolf writes, "English, which can express the thoughts of *Hamlet* and the tragedy of *Lear*, has no words for the shiver and the headache. It has all grown one way. The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare, Donne, Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry" (6-7). Picking up Woolf's argument, Elaine Scarry contends that "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned"; she maintains that pain has no language (4-5). The two sequences from *Stray Dogs* convey the notion of pain in subtly different manners.

Emotional identification can be seen in the "Singing and Weeping" sequence, in which Lee sings "Man Jiang Hong" (滿江紅) while working as a sandwich-man, a familiar figure in Taiwan's 2010s cityscape. Instead of walking around in an A-shaped billboard like his nineteenth-century counterparts, he stations himself at a busy crossroad holding a large signpost advertising real estate properties, overshadowed by a forest of billboards advertising similar things. The long-take frames a close-up shot of Lee in a flimsy yellow raincoat (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Lee Kang-sheng singing and weeping while holding the billboard

The lyrical poem he sings, literally "River Filled with Red," is believed to be written by the Song Dynasty general Yue Fei (岳飛, 1103-1142) after suffering unjust treatment by his sovereign. Though James Liu has argued convincingly that, contrary to popular belief, the poem was written in the early sixteenth-century by a different writer, it is the publicly imagined patriotic sentiment in the verse that is important to contemporary understanding. The lyrics depict the feelings of Yue Fei who received an imperial order to abort a battle he almost won: "Rage shoots my hair up against my helmet. / I lean against the railing as the howling rain ceases. / Looking up, I let out a long cry filled with passion and pain!" (怒髮衝冠，憑闌處，瀟瀟雨歇。抬望眼，仰天長嘯，壯懷激烈。) (qtd. in Tsai et al 39-40). Equating the "passion and pain" endured by a Song dynasty general to Lee's predicament as a sandwich-man is somewhat incommensurate and exaggerated, or better put by Abbas, "celebrating that which is in fact humiliating" ("Technical"). However, this gives the audience momentary relief, as if Lee's crying expresses and resolves our sense of pity to him as a sufferer. It becomes immediately clear, nevertheless, that Lee's expressionless face repels sympathy. His sadness and angst once again becomes incomprehensible.

While emotion induces sympathetic identification, affect has no known origin. In the "Devouring Miss Cabbage" sequence, Lee eats a piece of raw cabbage in a ten-minute long-take. "Miss Cabbage," a reminder of the female presence, is a cabbage-turned-doll that his daughter got from the supermarket where Lu works. He wakes up from an afternoon nap in their bed, and sees "Miss Cabbage" lying next to him. He fixes his gaze on it, then attacks it with his fingers and teeth and devours it violently before bursting into tears. There is no reason offered for his violence and pain. No word is spoken; only Lee's weeping is heard. It is not the weight of his suffering, but rather, an affect which is devoid of its emotional contents is transmitted. Unlike the understandable emotion (however exaggerated) expressed in the "Singing" sequence, this cinematic image suspends narrative, arresting the viewer's attention in a pure affective state. The "Singing" sequence works by creating an emotionally charged action, whereas here an affect is transmitted through an obscured image.

The sympathetic identification of suffering in *Stray Dogs* is prevented because empathy is counter-productive in resisting social injustice. A detour through Benjamin's entry in *The Arcades Project* illuminates this: "Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself. The *flâneur* is the virtuoso of this empathy. He takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll. Just as his final ambit is the department store, his last incarnation is the sandwich-man" (448; M17a, 2). For him, the figure of the *flâneur* is no more than a sandwich-man, when forced to work thanks to industrialism and capitalism, is an allegory of both self-commodification and advertising (Buck-Morss, 115). To show a figure of suffering, aiming to induce empathy in the audience is worse than not identifying with the victims of neoliberalism, because it only creates a false understanding of the issue. Empathy "was a purely mental event, and dissipated quickly from consciousness" (111). Representation of suffering records only the apparent reality behind which "the social relations of class remained concealed" (111). Unless the "phantasmagoria of the city" (113) is unveiled and the mass is awakened, real changes would not happen. So, inducing empathy in depicting suffering is an obstacle to real understanding. City experience is fast and shocking, as represented in Tsai's contemporaries, Edward Yang's *Terrorizers* (1986) and *Yi Yi* (2000), or Jia's *Still Life* (2006) and *24 City* (2008), whereas in *Stray Dogs*, an extraordinarily slow city is shown. *24 City* show an impersonal, collective suffering among city-dwellers, as opposed to the marginalized individual in Jia's *Xiao Wu*, a film about a pickpocket in Fenyang (in Shanxi province, China). In the ending sequence the arrested Xiao Wu is physically and visually segregated when he is handcuffed to a random lamppost in the city. In the very last long-take scene the camera shifts to identify with his gaze; rather than showing how he is looked at by the surrounding crowd, we see what he sees, thus avoiding a sentimental representation of his embarrassment.

At this point, it is fruitful to compare the politics of affect at work in *Stray Dogs* with that in Hamsun's *Hunger*, a text which depicts hunger in the city as a condition of the destitute. The narrator opens: "It was in those days when I wandered about hungry in Kristiania [Oslo], that strange city no one leaves before it has set its mark upon him" (3). Paul Auster argues that rather than creating identification with the suffering narrator, Hamsun "rigorously prevents us from feeling any compassion for his character" (251) since the narrator's will to suffer and to starve represents an act to fulfill an inner compulsion and to submit himself to the paradox: "[he] must eat in order to write. But if he does not write, he will not eat. And if he cannot eat, he cannot write" (250). The suffering represented in *Stray Dogs*, however, is caused by an unidentifiable, city-specific, non-existential crisis, though like

Hamsun the director also tries to prevent empathetic identification. The film requires the audience to respond to otherness which implies a failure to understand. Instead of making the audience feel, they are forced to stare at how the sandwich-man's suffering is induced by the city.

It is instructive to enlist Benjamin to illustrate the nature of the suffering endured by the poor in a city today. As described above, hunger is a defining feature of poverty in the not-too-distant past, as thematized in *Hunger*. For Lee and his children in *Stray Dogs*, however, the lack of food is never a problem. To the contrary, the film is replete of depictions of eating. At one point even the stray dogs are too full to eat the food offered by Lu (fig. 3). In a close-up shot, Lee is shown eating in a squatting position outside a construction site (fig. 4):



Fig. 3: Stray dogs taking shelter in the abandoned building



Fig. 4: Lee Kang-sheng eating drumstick-and-rice lunchbox

during the four-minute long-take, he scoffs with chopsticks and fingers the entire drumstick-and-rice lunchbox almost like an animal. Whereas hunger signifies poverty in the past, the indigent in the twentieth-first century city suffers in gluttony. In Abbas's words, it is not that people suffer in poverty because of the lack of food, but rather, a "poverty in plenty" ("Technical"). This bizarre condition is, in Benjamin's terms, a never-ending catastrophe sustained in the guise of human progress in the "Angelus Novus" image: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he [the angel] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet... The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" ("These" 249). The body is kept alive and even too well-fed, gorging on an endless supply of cheap food but nevertheless endures in the midst of the "storm of progress." A cessation of this situation is only possible through a revolutionary awakening, itself triggered in the event of a sudden perception of the dialectical image.

The suffering figure of the sandwich-man has undergone a transformation from its first appearance in the nineteenth-century. In *Stray Dogs*, Lee is neither happy nor unhappy, but he could not be categorized as being indifferent. He does not seem to know the class history associated with his own trade: a part-time, casual laborer, only ever one step away from begging. By comparison, Dickens's depiction of sandwich-man in *Sketches by Boz* (1836) seems to be more able to exert resistance to the oppressing city: "So he [Augustus Cooper] stopped the unstamped advertisement—an animated sandwich, composed of a boy between two boards" ("Character" 9.246). Although the sandwich-boy is represented as if he is eaten, he is nonetheless seen as a mobile, "leisurely walking" (246) human-billboard in the city. This element of humanity thus offering a possible resistance to commodity culture. In twenty-first-century Taiwan, however, the sandwich-man is not expected to walk, but to stand still with the wooden signpost in hands. This is quite unlike his counterpart in "Son's Big Doll," one of the three shorts in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The Sandwich Man*. Set in 1962 in a southern Taiwanese town, the short shows the life of a struggling father, Kun-shu, who earns a living after proposing to a newly-opened cinema that a human billboard dressed as clown would be an effective advertising technique. Unheard of before, he is called "the advertising man" and is made fun of by the locals. Hou's mobile sandwich-man, although a walking commodity, has at least an opportunity for upward mobility (he is employed as a bicycle-driver afterwards), whereas Lee in *Stray Dogs* is hopelessly stuck. Hou's walking "big doll" has a better chance in 1960s Taiwan, perhaps because he is named by other city-dwellers literally as "the advertising man" (廣告的) and therefore at least no hypocrisy veils the consumerist market to which he is submitted. In contrast, the stationary sandwich-man in *Stray Dogs* is reduced to being merely an attachment to the advertising board, worse than human refuse, an invisible by-product in 2010s Taiwan where neoliberal economy has become more powerful. The sandwich-man in Hou is "only a semiotic blip in a city filled with billboards and stickered storefronts, and during the course of the episode he goes from being the centre of attention to an overlooked and scorned part of a homogenized public space" (Diffrient 79-81), whereas in Tsai, the human billboard is not supposed to attract attention in the first place—the size of the advertisement overshadows his bodily existence. The billboards are too exposed in the everyday-life of the cityscape, so much so that the sandwich-man's existence is not understood by the city-dwellers. If it is still possible to induce empathetic identification by showing the hardship experienced by a sandwich-man in the 1960s, it is no longer possible to represent the suffering of the same trade by the 2010s. Kun-shu is an "advertising man," whereas Lee is no more than an attachment to the advertisement. If the sandwich-boy in nineteenth-century London has a chance to resist misery by walking leisurely, the clown-like Kun-shu is visible as a commodity when he walks, and the unseen Lee is reduced to an invisible mark attached to a billboard, worse than a commodity. A new attentiveness is necessary to make the sandwich-man seen and his situations revealed.

I have illustrated how Tsai's film literally strays from the commonplace representations of the figures of the dog and the sandwich-man in the city and how other literary and filmic texts provides ground for a new imagination of the twenty-first-century urban condition in *Stray Dogs*. Now I return to Benjamin to explore the workings of his "dialectical image" in the film. Having realized that the slow temporal images reject the politics of sympathetic identification which lead only to a higher level of oppression instead of their intended function of unveiling social injustice in an age of globalized neoliberalism, we can further appreciate that Tsai creates a new mode of cinematic images in the age of cinematic production in which digital technology has superseded celluloid film (*Stray Dogs* is Tsai's first digital feature). If cinema operates in the mode of distraction in the form of montage where contradictory images collide synthetically, Tsai's slow aesthetics, characterized by a series of long-

shots, allows the spectator to recognize the image, achieving a moment of the "arrest of thoughts" so that thinking can happen. Understanding in empathy is actually mis-understanding, whereas non-understanding in seeing Tsai's images opens up perceptions during the endurance of the boredom of watching, allowing the "caesura" to cut through thoughts. When the tensions between thinking and non-thinking, understanding and non-understanding are at work, an arrest of thoughts happens when dialectical images flash up in a split second.

The act of staring in *Stray Dogs* aims to create estranged images which allow the potential for the co-existence of different layers of the past to accumulate tension. Only when the image in the "now of its recognizability" is read in the endurance of staring, the arrest of thoughts happens. Benjamin writes,

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural (*bildhaft*). Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—i.e. not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability—bears to the greatest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. (463; N3,1)

The figural nature of the relation of what-has-been to the now is crucial in understanding what Benjamin means by a genuinely historical image, one that disrupts history as catastrophic progress embodied in the figure of Angelus Novus.

The investment in staring builds up in three modes of slowness which serves as caesura in the narrative: the characters' (especially Lee's) everyday mundane activities, their act of staring, and the audience's self-reflective realization of staring. The last two modes can be seen in two instances in *Stray Dogs*. Both of these staring sequences involve a mural which is housed in the abandoned building frequented by stray dogs and apparently the same site in which Lee and his children take temporary residence. The mural first appears when Lu contemplates it after feeding the dogs (fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Lu Yi-ching staring at the mural before urinating on the ground

Although she has a decent job and takes care of the children, the aesthetics of the film reduces her existence to nothing more than the stray dogs that she feeds. In the five-minute long-take, wrapped in a transparent raincoat, Lu stands in the middle of the room and faces the mural which covers the entire wall. After standing still for around four minutes staring at the mural, she puts down the torch and the plastic bag of expired meat from her supermarket, pulls her skirt up and her underwear down, squats, urinates on the floor, and leaves the room. No facial expression is featured, but rather, the

character and the audience's attention are focused on the mural. The charcoal mural was drawn by the Taiwanese artist Kao Jun-Honn in a separate project *Taiwan Motor Transport / Return* (臺汽 / 回到), and was discovered accidentally by Tsai. Kao's work is part of "The Ruin Image Crystal Project" (廢墟影像晶體計畫) in 2013. Kao wanted to "return the image to the site where it belongs," to "an unmediated place instead of an air-conditioned, man-made exhibition space" (Kao, translation mine). He enlarged a historical photograph titled *Lalung, Formosa*, taken by a Scottish journalist, John Thomson, who visited Taiwan in 1871. The collotype photograph, originally appearing in *Voyage en Chine*, was adapted into a woodcut image by Frédéric Sorrieu and published in *Le tour de monde: nouveau journal des voyages* in 1875 (fig. 6). Kao's act of reproducing a pre-colonial, orientalized image of the "beautiful island" via the eye of a western photographer on the wall of the Material House of Taiwan Motor Transport Co. Ltd. in present-day Taiwan is charged with criticism. Both the gaze of the colonizers (though Scotland did not colonize Taiwan) and the neoliberal economy of present-day Taiwan are problematized. The mural is reproduced in charcoal, with the two aboriginal children omitted. As a Taiwanese subject, Kao's act of reclaiming a lost history by reproducing and appropriating a politically-charged colonial image is confronted with the ephemeral nature of the ruined site where the mural is drawn. Different layers of temporality are juxtaposed.

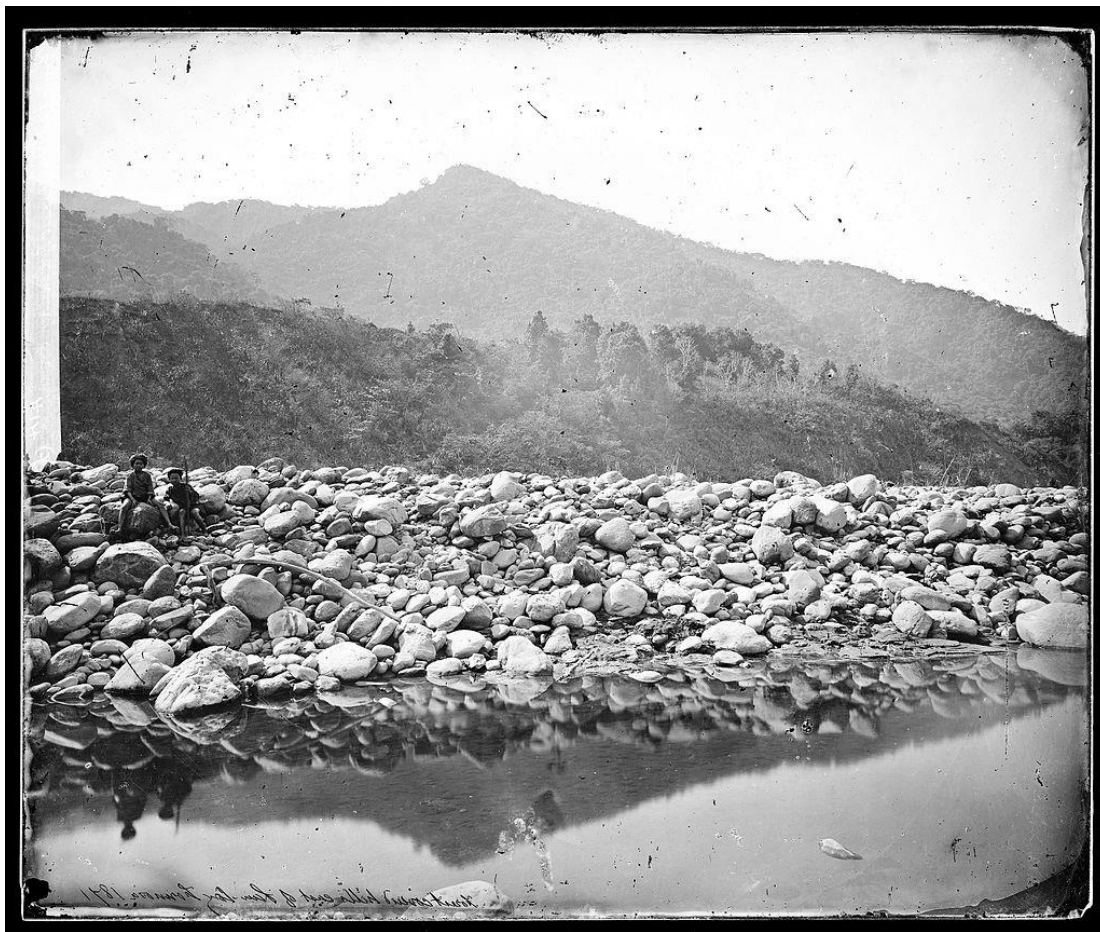


Fig. 6: John Thomson, *Lalung, Formosa*, 1871, glass photonegative, wet collodion, glass size 25.5 x 30.5 cm

Song-Yong Sing (*Projecting* 159-83) discusses the different layers of political implications of reproducing a photograph taken by a foreigner in *Stray Dogs*. He maintains that Kao's reproduction of an enlarged panoramic landscape could be understood as an act of destroying "the imperial gaze" (175). The rubbles in the ruined building resemble the cobblestones in the mural, leading Sing to

argue that the scenery in the mural is re-presented on the floor, and by extension, exceeds beyond its frame. For him, Tsai's sequence can be read as dystopian criticism: "it is no longer a photograph or a wood cut of exotic landscape, but a reality which the audience has to face—their situations of life as ruin" (178). The dilapidated building was abandoned in 1995; the state-owned company privatized in 2001 and dissolved after ten years. Both Kao and Tsai took advantage of its ruined state before the commencement of demolition and construction. While Kao's deliberate attempt to repossess Taiwan's past highlights its failed present, Tsai inserts himself into the historical discourse by incorporating the mural into his film. Not surprisingly, the building was demolished in 2017, leaving the film the only memorial of the mural. The film serves as an archive of the disappeared mural which itself records layers of alternative histories, reminding the audience that understanding has to be informed by a sense of historical co-existence which allows different historical narratives in dialogue with each other.

Rather than interpreting these various layers as a palimpsest, I suggest adopting a non-linear approach to these images. The act of staring evokes the forgotten histories not only of the colonial picture, but also of the abandoned motor material factory and the reality of modern Taiwan. It affords the spectator—both of the mural and the film—an encounter with an image which lures contemplation and thoughts that are flashed up in a standstill. Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image functions as a putting together of contradictory ideas from the two poles of the dialectics. It aims for a momentary awakening in which thoughts are "arrested," stimulated by the collision of the two oppositions. But instead of Eisenstein's montage image, the Benjaminian dialectical image is more suited to describing Tsai's slow cinema. It is the sustained long-take which affords the spectator's distractions that allow the dialectical image to take effect. Ben Moore notes that Benjamin "uses the language of thesis-antithesis-synthesis," whereas "awakening is not a synthesis that brings about a new unity, but rather a 'point of rupture' which pierces through any appearance of unity" (66). Benjamin writes, "The greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience (*Erfahrung*) and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience (*Erlebnis*)" (*Selected Writings* 4:319). *Erfahrung*, "long experience," is associated with antiquity, a continuous accessible narrative; whereas *Erlebnis*, "isolated experience," is associated with modernity, belonging to an instantaneous, disconnected, disintegrated moment of shock experience. Benjamin analogizes the pair *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* with working and gambling: "No game is dependent on the preceding one.... Gambling gives short shrift to the weighty past on which work bases itself" (329). The two modes of experience differ in how memory operates. In *Erfahrung*, memory works by accumulating memories of the past; whereas in *Erlebnis*, no narrativizable memory can be formed. To achieve a moment of rupture, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* must be read together dialectically. The sustained long-take and the still image in Tsai provide a ground for such a reading. On the one hand, *Erfahrung* is manifest in the story of the Lees or the narrative in "Excursion," the son's school assignment; on the other hand, *Erlebnis* is materialized in Lee and Chen's unexplained sobs or in their staring at the mural. The duration of these sequences is so prolonged that the cinematic image is drained of narrative content, that is, these scenes are unnecessarily, unbearably extended and slow to simply unfold a plot. What the audience is confronted with is the happening in the moment. The nature of the city is to keep people moving, disallowing *Erlebnis* even beyond destruction; but the dogs are always taking a rest in the building instead of straying, and the characters are unexpectedly calm, as if trying to resist grand-narrative writing in the mode of *Erfahrung* by crystallizing the act in the moment.

The mural reappears, again as the object of contemplation, in the final sequence. In the penultimate scene, a fourteen-minute long-take, Chen, with a torch, approaches the room where the mural (outside the camera frame) is drawn, followed by Lee (fig. 7). There is not much action, except tears coming slowly from her eyes, the approach of Lee, his drinking from a bottle of alcohol, the resting of his head on her shoulder when he realizes that she is weeping silently, and the occasional passing of a train outside the building.



Fig. 7: Chen Shiang-chyi and Lee Kang-sheng facing the mural

It is one of the rare cases in *Stray Dogs* where a close-up shot is offered, with two faces filling up the frame, recalling the sequences of drumstick lunchbox eating and "Man Jiang Hong" singing. While Lee's face and Chen's tears are featured here, there is something outside the frame of the cinema that attracts the attention of the two spectators. These near-still images cut to the last seven-minute shot, with a change of camera position. Now its shooting from the back of the room, from the wall facing the mural, to show their backs from a distance, offering a wide-angle perspectival view of the mural. After a few minutes, Chen walks away from Lee's embrace, moving slowly to door to the right of the mural, leaving him alone (fig. 8). The mural occupies a much smaller portion than on its first appearance, leaving the ceiling and the floor with different textures.



Fig. 8: Lee Kang-sheng in absorption after Chen Shiang-chyi has left

When Lu stares at the mural, the camera position is slightly to the left, framing her as a spectator while also being looked at. Here, the stillness transforms Lee's body to a shadow placed in the middle of a composition, as if he belongs to a two-dimensional pictorial world created not by the cinematic materials but by paints on a canvas. Lee's back, as a dark shadow, offers an anamorphic gaze, not in the sense of creating an extra dimension, but in transforming the three-dimensional cinematic world into a two-dimensional pictorial world, a flat surface.

But the surface is not exactly a still image, because with Lee's body visible the audience still expects movement however minimal and slow the action may be. The transformation into a picture is not completed until Lee eventually walks away. Lee's staring lasts for few minutes, accompanied by the sound of his breathing before he empties the bottle, drops it to the floor, and takes his leave. The space is left with a sustained stillness. The audience is now confronted with an empty space initially filled with environmental sound (such as wind, or a passing train), and later complete silence and a monochromatic greyish-blue color (with a touch of green outside), and different forms and levels of framings: the window, the mural, the light shine of the floor forming a distorted frame, and the rectangular ceilings. Although Kao's mural is placed in the center, different frames and various textures distract the viewer's attention. The textures of the rubble on the floor, now framed by the shadow of the window, resemble both those drawn in the mural and that of the ceiling, creating a *mise-en-abîme* of representation, inviting the audience to participate in "the transformation of a cinematic space into a silent picture" (Sing 182). The stillness of the images and the diminishing environmental sound provide a temporary panel surface, a moving still life image, a motionless picture. With the spectator figure now gone, the audience is drawn into the world of eternal stillness, a photograph-turned-mural which is merged with the surrounding ruins, leaving the sound of the passing train, a reminder of the rain and tears.

Different levels of reality and layers of temporality are juxtaposed on a single surface. There are at least three different histories: first, the nineteenth-century photograph reproduced as a black-and-white charcoal drawing which falls within the framework of a critical post-colonial discourse, corresponding to *Erfahrung*; second, the ruined building Lee occupies is itself a phantasmagorical space packed with irreducible narratives, constituting a modern vision of Taipei, an *Erlebnis*; and finally, the transformation of the film-world into a photograph-like flat surface, the process of which involves a change in temporality that turns the viewer into what Raymond Bellour calls a "pensive spectator" (6, 10). Since the viewer is already two hours into the film by the time the last sequence begins, Tsai has to further slow down (or, conversely, speed up the pace, a strategy that is inconceivable to him) the cinematic tempo to create a rupture, which necessitates further endurance from the audience. The extreme long-take freezes the already slow image in the last seven minutes, thereby transforming the screen into the mural itself. At the same time, as the sustained long-take is crystallized and the slow action frozen, the audience takes on the role of the spectator. Commenting on Tsai's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), Lutz Koepnick's descriptions of its long-take seems applicable here: "The relentless stare of Tsai's camera, lingering as if it were a mere surveillance apparatus, comes to evoke nothing less than the presence of an absence, the riddle of a lack that drives time forward. It presents projected images as material points of contact whose inherent blind spots and vacancies make us curious not only about what has been lost but also what is to come" (Koepnick 92). The complete stillness prompts an awareness of being distracted from a slow but moving image. This meta-moment of film-watching affects thinking, empowering the viewer to encounter the Benjaminian arrest of thoughts.

It is not simply seeing a suffering figure or identifying with such a figure that induces social change. For Benjamin, it is in the moment of the arrest of thoughts offered by the dialectical image that the audience could be awakened from the phantasmagoria of the city. Tsai has created a cinematic aesthetics characterized by its lack of a coherent narrative and by its slow action and extreme long-take, the latter facilitated by the digital cinematography employed in *Stray Dogs*. I have shown, primarily by means of Benjamin's idea of the dialectical image, that the politics and the aesthetics of these devices must not be understood separately. In twenty-first-century Taiwan, Tsai's slow, "pensive" cinema replaces Eisensteinian montage dialectics to offer a potential awakening of the revolutionary possibility of real social change. There is a hope that when memory is regained in the slow awakening during the audience's endurance in Tsai's slow cinema, real understanding can be achieved.

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